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ABSTRACT

This project, implemented collaboratively between a research/teaching university and a midwestern special education cooperative, gathered data from 517 regular education teachers regarding self-evaluation of skills for teaching students with disabilities, satisfaction with existing special education services, and attitudes toward an "inclusive" model of special education service delivery. Results revealed significant differences in teachers' perceptions of their skill level for serving regular versus special education students. The majority of respondents were pleased with in-service education sessions and other professional development options available. Feelings were generally positive regarding existing collaboration between regular and special educators and regarding social acceptance of students with disabilities by nondisabled students. Approximately two-thirds of respondents indicated that existing special services were effective overall. Teachers strongly felt that traditional service delivery options should be available in addition to inclusion, and that placement decisions should be made on an individual basis. The majority felt that inclusion was being "forced" on them. Fifty percent of respondents stated that they were personally supportive of inclusion, and 37 percent said they were not. Teachers felt that improved services would result from smaller class size, more time for collaboration between regular and special educators, modifying assignments and tests for students with disabilities, and building principal support for inclusion. (JDD)

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PERCEPTIONS OF SPECIAL EDUCATION PROGRAM EFFECTIVENESS AND ATTITUDES TOWARD INCLUSION

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Abstract

This project was a collaborative effort between a research/teaching university and a local special education cooperative, a consolidation of three Midwestern school corporations. The purpose of the project was to gather data from four stakeholder groups (i.e., regular education teachers, special education teachers, building principals, and parents of students with disabilities) regarding satisfaction with existing special education services and attitudes toward an "inclusive" model of special education service delivery. Surveys were developed, administered, coded, entered into the computer and analyzed with the SPSS statistical program. This presentation describes only the data collected from the regular education teachers. This group included the largest number of respondents, 528 of 990, a 53% return rate.

Statement of the Problem

Since the passage of public law 94-142, in 1975, special education services for many students with disabilities have primarily consisted of "pull-out" programs. These programs have been so named because students with disabilities are removed from regular education classes for a portion of the school day to receive individualized instruction. However, recent movements in education (e.g., Regular Education Initiative) have criticized pull-out programs on the grounds that: (a) segregation of special and regular education services have negative effects on all students, (b) students with disabilities have been labeled and isolated from age-mates, and (c) "pull-out" services are ineffective in meeting the educational needs of students with disabilities.

Consequently, a recent trend in education is to more fully "include" students with disabilities within the mainstream of regular education. This "inclusion" movement encourages increased collaboration between regular education and special education teachers to co-plan and co-teach classes of heterogeneous learners. Proponents of inclusion argue that all learners (i.e., regular education students, special education students, and numerous other low-achieving students, who do not qualify for special services) reap benefits from this arrangement.

However, the inclusive movement has not been well-received by all of the schools' stakeholder groups for a variety of reasons.

For example, regular education teachers in the state of Indiana are not required to take a course in special education prior to teacher certification. Consequently, they may feel blatantly unprepared to meet the educational and behavioral needs of students with disabilities. This project focuses on the perceptions of regular education teachers regarding their evaluation of existing special education services, current skills for meeting the needs of students with varying disabilities, attitudes toward inclusive service delivery, and ways to improve the quality of services for these students.

Subjects

The subjects of this investigation were 528 regular education teachers who teach in a special education cooperative that currently serves approximately 1600 students with special needs. Eleven of 528 surveys were not completed properly and were excluded from analysis resulting in a final sample of 517 respondents. Additional demographic information includes the following. The sample was 72% female and 28% male. The age of the largest proportion of respondents, 47%, fell between ranges of 40-49. The ethnic background of the majority of the sample was white non-Hispanic, 92% and the remaining 8% represented Native American, Asian, and African American backgrounds. Seventy-seven percent of the sample had completed Masters degrees and 16% held bachelors degrees. Seventy percent of these regular education teachers have taken no coursework in special education. Several preparation for

inclusion activities had been provided by the special education cooperative including planning sessions, workshops, and site/visits to other schools implementing inclusive programs. Eighty-four percent of this sample had not participated in any of these activities whereas the remaining 16% participated in one or more of these activities.

Survey Instrument

Surveys consisted of questions related to each of the following: (1) demographic data including professional experience and degrees obtained; (2) self-evaluation of the skills, knowledge, and experiences necessary to effectively teach students of varying disability categories; (3) program evaluation, rating the existing special education service delivery including staff development opportunities, and communication among stakeholders; and (4) recommendations for improved special services.

Surveys employed a variety of question formats: yes-no; short answer; (e.g., please specify the number of students with disabilities within your current caseload) multiple choice; lacerate scale rankings (e.g., 1= definitely disagree, 2= somewhat disagree, 3= no opinion, 4= somewhat agree, and 5= definitely agree) and open-ended questions (i.e., other suggestions for improved services or comments related to inclusion).

Method/Procedure

The first phase of this project consisted of planning sessions between the Coordinator of Special Services and ourselves. Our

priorities were to determine: (a) the type of information which our school-based colleagues were seeking and (b) types of staff-development activities and inclusion pilot projects that had been implemented in these schools to date. The second phase consisted of a search of the literature and additional networking procedures to gain information about similar survey projects. In phase three the surveys were constructed, revised, piloted, and approved by representatives of the teachers' union and finally the school superintendent. Phase four was actual administration of the instrument which occurred in October of the 1993-1994 school year. In phase six, the surveys were coded, entered into the computer and analyzed with the SPSS statistical program. Means, standard deviations, frequencies, percentage scores, and other summary statistics were calculated for all items as appropriate.

Results/Findings

This section first presents results from teachers' self-evaluation of the skills for teaching students with varying disabilities. Second, results are presented from teachers' evaluation of the existing special education service delivery and their attitudes and beliefs about inclusion. Finally, results are presented related to teachers' recommendations for ways to improve delivery of special services. Each is described separately below.

Skill Self-Evaluation

Teachers' self-evaluation of the knowledge and skills required to teach students with varying categories of disabilities is

presented in Table 1. Second, respondents evaluated their skills on three variables, first, for regular education students and second for students with special needs (see Table 2). T-tests conducted on teachers' skill in instructional planning, adapting instruction, and meeting the behavioral needs revealed significant differences in their skill level between regular and special education students.

Evaluation of Special Education Services

Results were obtained regarding three elements of existing special education services. First, the majority of respondents were pleased with in-services and other professional development options available (86% agree and 13% disagree). Second, feelings were generally positive regarding: (a) existing collaboration between regular and special educators (69% agree and 21% disagree) and (b) social acceptance of students with disabilities by nondisabled students (55% agree and 24% disagree). Finally, 66% of respondents indicated that existing special services were effective overall (66% agree and 18% disagree).

Attitudes Toward Inclusion

Three critical ideas were supported by results of this section. First, teachers feel strongly that traditional service delivery options must also be available for students with special needs (96% agree to strongly agree) and that placement decisions must be made on an individual basis (94% agree to strongly agree).

Second, the majority of these regular education teachers are

concerned about "the change" related to inclusion (86% agree to strongly agree) and feel that inclusion is being "forced" on them (80% agree to strongly agree).

Responses were more evenly distributed related to support for inclusion. More specifically only 53% of teacher agreed that inclusion, if implemented on a voluntary basis will succeed (30% undecided, 14% disagree to strongly disagree). Fifty percent of respondents stated that they were personally supportive of inclusion and 37% said they were not. Finally, nearly equal numbers (40%) agreed and disagreed (39%) that most educators are generally supportive of inclusive programs.

Teachers' Suggestions for Improved Service Delivery

This section describes the results of six queries regarding ways to provide improved services to students with disabilities. First, teachers strongly supported that smaller class size would result in improved services (94% agree to strongly agree). Second, strong support emerged for more time for collaboration between regular and special educators and for instructional planning. Third, the majority of respondents felt positive about modifying assignments and tests for students with disabilities (80% agree to strongly agree). Fourth, the support of the building principal was seen as critical for improved services (84% agree to strongly agree) with parental involvement seen as less important (48% agree to strongly agree). Fifth, 60% of respondents expressed support for co-teaching between regular and special educators. Finally,

respondents were clearly divided on the issue of whether or not regular educators should be required to take a course in special education with 47% in agreement and 50% opposed to such a requirement.

Discussion/Implications

This project represents a university-school collaboration to evaluate existing school-based practices for students with disabilities and perceptions regarding more inclusive service delivery.

Preliminary analyses conducted on surveys of 517 regular educators reveals some informative results. For example, teachers evaluated their skill level for working with disabled students as might be expected: they were most comfortable with learning disabled students and least comfortable working with severely disabled students. Hence, regular education teachers need exposure to students of varying disabilities and specific training on how to address their educational needs.

Another interesting finding was the perception that change and inclusion is being forced upon educators. Therefore, it is imperative that we change the perception that inclusion is being forced; instead schools should be permitted to volunteer to pilot inclusion projects and serve as models. Although feelings toward inclusion were mixed, a greater number of regular teachers supported inclusion than did not.

Teachers suggest that administrators consider reducing class

sizes and provide the time and opportunity for regular and special education to collaborate to plan instruction. It is surprising that over 80% of the teachers are positive about modifying assignments and tests for students with disabilities.

The survey also reveals that is it critical for building principals to support inclusion. Therefore, school districts might offer opportunities for principals to visit inclusive schools and develop their own plan to implement inclusion in their school. It also is evident that a key to successful inclusion is the involvement of the stakeholders in the decision making process.